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# PART THREE

## "Where Is God Now?"

(Elie Wiesel, *Night*)

> Where are we going?
> *To the end of the world, little girl. We are going to the end of the world.*
> Is that far?
> *No, not really.*
> You see, I am really tired. Is it wrong, tell me, is it wrong to be so tired?
> *Everybody is tired, my little girl.*
> Even God?
> *I don't know. You will ask Him yourself.*
>
> Elie Wiesel, "A Mother and Her Daughter," *A Jew Today*

Some questions are as old as creation: Why is there something rather than nothing? Other questions are as ancient as human civilization: Why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper?

Some questions are new and unprecedented: Will human beings end the world as we know it by using nuclear weapons? Will we exercise our capacity to destroy ourselves and all life on earth?

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, old questions are asked anew and new questions are asked with greater urgency and intensity. The question from Elie Wiesel's *Night*—"Where is God now?"—provides a case in point. In it we hear the echo of the biblical Job, but the echo resounds with a contemporary voice of its own.

Judaism and Christianity maintain that God is benevolent, omnipotent, and immanent (though transcendent, God is also involved in history). Biblical religions deny that history is absurd or meaningless.

These faiths regard history as the domain in which the divine expresses its plan for humanity and for all creation.

The Biblical prophets spoke of reward and punishment and of a just God. They spoke of a loving and merciful deity and of the unique bond that linked God and Israel. Political defeat, military victory, famine, or prosperity were accepted as the expression of divine will. All made sense over the long range of divine time. Only the limited, temporal understanding of humanity failed to comprehend God's plan for history and our unique place in that drama.

But even the most devout believer was not without doubt or anguish. The Psalmist could ask: "Why dost Thou stand afar off, O Lord? Why dost Thou hide Thyself in times of trouble? . . . For the wicked boasts of his heart's desire; and the greedy man curses and spurns the Lord. . . . He says to himself 'God has forgotten; He has hidden His face. He will never see it.' " (Psalms 10)

Job could contend with his friends demanding to know the nature of his iniquity, the reason for his suffering. In the end, however, Job yielded—not to an answer he could comprehend but to a sense of God's presence that gave his pain a purpose.

Judaism and Christianity parted company over their understanding of the covenant between God and Israel, the meaning of the people Israel, the content of revelation, the identity of Jesus, and the timing of redemption. But both religions affirmed the ultimate meaning of cosmos and history.

For Judaism, the covenant at Sinai with the ancient Israelites bound generation after generation of Jews. The commandments are expressed in a way of life transmitted from parent to child. The revelation was to continue until the end of days, the end of history. The Messiah has not yet come.

For Christianity, Sinai was replaced by Golgotha, Moses the master by Jesus the Son of God, and the covenant with the people Israel (descendants of those who stood at Sinai) by a covenant with the new Israel (those who accept Jesus as the Christ and follow his teaching). According to Christianity, the Jews have been superseded by Christians as the people of the covenant. They, too, live in expectation of redemption—of the return of a redeemer who was once present and would come again to complete his messianic mission.

Despite these monumental differences—which have been the source of antisemitism, conflict, and murder throughout centuries of peaceless coexistence—both Christianity and Judaism stood together in their view that history expressed God's plan for the world. History was the map upon which we were to read the impressions of God's will.

Although the pious Jew and the faithful Christian might differ in their ways of life, their religious observances, their understanding of the past, and their expectations for the future, both presumed—though the former might often be the victim of the latter—that they lived in a world suffused with God's presence. This world was ultimately—and fundamentally—meaningful.

Naturally, the Holocaust was a shock to the Jewish people. Six million Jews—one third of the corpus of the people Israel—were murdered; one and half million of the slain were children. Entire communities perished, among them the most pious and righteous; eighty percent of the rabbis in the world were killed, as were ninety percent of the full-time students of the Torah.

Not only the fact but the manner of death stunned the Jewish psyche; the victims were subjected to a process of dehumanization and bureaucratic killing that robbed them of all identity and defiled their humanity prior to murder. Jewish history had seen much suffering—from the sacrifice of Isaac to the martyrdom of Hannah and her seven sons; from the Crusaders of medieval Europe to the Cossacks of late seventeenth-century Russia—but nothing in the past compared with the Holocaust.

Jewish liturgy speaks of God as a merciful father, but the cruelty of the Nazis overwhelmed even the memory of mercy. Jewish prayers speak of a God who answered His people in their time of need, but never had the Jews needed God more and never was the God of Israel less available to them than in the years between 1939 and 1945.

Jewish leaders could appeal to the attribute of God's justice, but that justice loses meaning when the nearly-achieved goal of the persecutor is biological obliteration of Jewish blood defined by the identity of one's grandparents. For those Jews living after the Holocaust, it became more difficult to speak of God as good, loving, merciful, or powerful. More difficult still is it to speak of a meaningful human history expressing a divine plan for the people Israel.

The Holocaust forces Judaism (and Christianity) to reexamine its most fundamental beliefs. As Lawrence Langer argues, "From the perspective of the victims, who far outnumber the survivors, the disorder of meaningless death contradicts the ordering impulses of time. Those who died for nothing in the Holocaust left the living with a paralyzing dilemma of facing a perpetually present grief."

As an event, the Holocaust cannot be reduced to an order, to a system for survival, or even to a sense of overriding meaning. For many, the Holocaust defies meaning and negates hope. The scope of victimization reduces even survival to a nullity.

At the end of the book of Lamentations, a scroll read in the synagogue on the ninth day of Av (the anniversary of the destruction of the first and second Temples—in 586 B.C.E. and 70 C.E. respectively—and of the exile of the Jewish people), two verses are chanted: "Return us unto Thee, oh Lord, and we shall return; renew our days as of old. Unless You have abandoned us entirely, have been angry with us to the extreme." Tradition mandates that the book not end in utter abandonment but that the verse of return be repeated so that the lament can end with the possibility of hope.

We will read five Jewish theologians in this section of the anthology, five thinkers who must contend with the problem of abandonment and divine absence. How does one find a way to end the lament with the possibility of hope? How does one speak of God, of the Jewish people and humanity, in a time of despair? The answers of these men will differ radically, as they should, because such anguishing questions cannot yield simple answers.

Elie Wiesel, whose dialogues have framed the questions we ask, speaks in the voice of the young boy he was when he was transported from the world of the Yeshiva to the gates of Birkenau. We hear him think of God in the camps, when he observes a praying congregation during the High Holidays, when he encounters a dying child hanging on the gallows.

We read of Richard Rubenstein's moment of conversion when he faced the full implications of covenantal faith in the world of the Holocaust. So, too, we hear Emil Fackenheim try to articulate the Commanding Voice of Auschwitz in a world where God was absent. Eliezer Berkovits paints a portrait of the survivors who must redeem God and Jewish history in the end of days. And Irving Greenberg speaks of the dialectics of faith when he suggests a principle of truth after the Holocaust. "No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of the burning children."

We have collected significant essays by major Jewish thinkers not because the question of God's presence in history is restricted to Jews, nor because the theological issues raised by the Holocaust apply only to one faith community and not the other. On the contrary, the Holocaust raises as many questions for the content of Christian faith as it does for Judaism. The Jewish thinkers we present do not speak to their own faith community alone, nor do they confine their insights to the world of Jewish existence.

Richard Rubenstein's moment of truth came in his encounter with Heinrich Grüber, dean of the Evangelical Church of East and West Berlin, a courageous anti-Nazi whose passion for justice made him testify against Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem but whose Christian commitments led him to assert without embarrassment that Auschwitz was the will of God. "For some reason, it was part of God's plan that the Jews died. God demands our death daily. He is the Lord, He is the Master, all is in His keeping and ordering," Grüber said. Rabbi and pastor discussed the ultimate meaning of mass murder and systematic, bureaucratic genocide; the pastor found meaning in the teaching of his faith, but the rabbi could not. Rubenstein repudiated his faith in the God of history.

Irving Greenberg, an Orthodox rabbi, speaks of the challenge of the Holocaust to Christian faith. He asks whether religions of redemption are credible in a world where, as Hegel put it, history is "the slaughter-bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states, and the virtue of individuals have been sacrificed." Greenberg asks what faith in Jesus means in a world so distant from redemption.

After the Holocaust, Christian thinkers have been forced to confront Christian antisemitism and the fact that the Holocaust took place within the heart of Christian Europe. The perpetrators were Christians, they acted in part out of the teachings—latent if not manifest in their tradition. Important work has been done by Christian scholars—such as James Parkes, Alice and A. Roy Eckhart, Franklin Littell, Rosemary Ruether, and Paul van Buren—exploring the theological roots of Christian antisemitism. In Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church boldly reevaluated its teaching on the Jews, altering sacred liturgy, recrafting the understanding of the crucifixion and the relationship of the daughter religion to its mother faith.

In Elie Wiesel's dialogue between "A Mother and Her Daughter" with which Part Three begins, the little girl wonders where they are going. She is tired. She wonders whether God is tired, too. A child's question, it is anything but childish when asked on the way to Auschwitz, on the way to the end of the world. The little girl's mother does not know the answer, but she knows the question deserves to be asked, confronted, and shared.

As we have seen, any confrontation with the Holocaust has the power to raise the most basic of all questions: Why creation? Why evil? How do we speak of God, and how do we speak to God? Is religious integrity to be found in obedience or in defiance? Is the religious vocation of this generation to find answers or to wrestle with the appropriate questions—those questions that are without answers?

Once the most basic questions are asked, Christians and Jews can find a common ground with each other because they need each other. The struggle for truth robs each faith of the arrogance of its certitude. Humility is the prerequisite for dialogue.